PARKER PYNE

Agatha Christie

THE HOUSE AT SHIRAZ

A SHORT STORY

The House at Shiraz

A Parker Pyne Short Story

by Agatha Christie

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The House at Shiraz

‘The House at Shiraz’ was first published in the USA in Cosmopolitan, April 1933, and then as ‘In the House at Shiraz’ in Nash’s Pall Mall, June 1933.

It was six in the morning when Mr Parker Pyne left for Persia after a stop in Baghdad.

The passenger space in the little monoplane was limited, and the small width of the seats was not such as to accommodate the bulk of Mr Parker Pyne with anything like comfort. There were two fellow travellers – a large, florid man whom Mr Parker Pyne judged to be of a talkative habit and a thin woman with pursed-up lips and a determined air.

‘At any rate,’ thought Mr Parker Pyne, ‘they don’t look as though they would want to consult me professionally.’

Nor did they. The little woman was an American missionary, full of hard work and happiness, and the florid man was employed by an oil company. They had given their fellow traveller a résumé of their lives before the plane started.

‘I am merely a tourist, I am afraid,’ Mr Parker Pyne had said deprecatingly. ‘I am going to Teheran and Ispahan and Shiraz.’

And the sheer music of the names enchanted him so much as he said them that he repeated them. Teheran. Ispahan. Shiraz.

Mr Parker Pyne looked out at the country below him. It was flat desert. He felt the mystery of these vast, unpopulated regions.

At Kermanshah the machine came down for passport examinations and customs. A bag of Mr Parker Pyne’s was opened. A certain small cardboard box was scrutinized with some excitement. Questions were asked. Since Mr Parker Pyne did not speak or understand Persian, the matter was difficult.

The pilot of the machine strolled up. He was a fair-haired young German, a fine-looking man, with deep-blue eyes and a weatherbeaten face. ‘Please?’ he inquired pleasantly.

Mr Parker Pyne, who had been indulging in some excellent realistic pantomime without, it seemed, much success, turned to him with relief. ‘It’s bug powder,’ he said. ‘Do you think you could explain it to them?’

The pilot looked puzzled. ‘Please?’

Mr Parker Pyne repeated his plea in German. The pilot grinned and translated the sentence into Persian. The grave and sad officials were pleased; their sorrowful faces relaxed; they smiled. One even laughed. They found the idea humorous.

The three passengers took their places in the machine again and the flight continued. They swooped down at Hamadan to drop the mails, but the plane did not stop. Mr Parker Pyne peered down, trying to see if he could distinguish the rock of Behistun, that romantic spot where Darius describes the extent of his empire and conquests in three different languages – Babylonian, Median and Persian.

It was one o’clock when they arrived at Teheran. There were more police formalities. The German pilot had come up and was standing by smiling as Mr Parker Pyne finished answering a long interrogation which he had not understood.

‘What have I said?’ he asked of the German.

‘That your father’s Christian name is Tourist, that your profession is Charles, that the maiden name of your mother is Baghdad, and that you have come from Harriet.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Not the least in the world. Just answer something; that is all they need.’

Mr Parker Pyne was disappointed in Teheran. He found it distressingly modern. He said as much the following evening when he happened to run into Herr Schlagal, the pilot, just as he was entering his hotel. On an impulse he asked the other man to dine, and the German accepted.

The Georgian waiter hovered over them and issued his orders. The food arrived.

When they had reached the stage of *la torte*, a somewhat sticky confection of chocolate, the German said:

‘So you go to Shiraz?’

‘Yes. I shall fly there. Then I shall come back from Shiraz to Ispahan and Teheran by road. Is it you who will fly me to Shiraz tomorrow?’

‘*Ach*, no. I return to Baghdad.’

‘You have been long here?’

‘Three years. It has only been established three years, our service. So far, we have never had an accident – *unberufen*!’ He touched the table.

Thick cups of sweet coffee were brought. The two men smoked.

‘My first passengers were two ladies,’ said the German reminiscently. ‘Two English ladies.’

‘Yes?’ said Mr Parker Pyne.

‘The one she was a young lady very well born, the daughter of one of your ministers, the – how does one say it? – the Lady Esther Carr. She was handsome, very handsome, but mad.’

‘Mad?’

‘Completely mad. She lives there at Shiraz in a big native house. She wears Eastern dress. She will see no Europeans. Is that a life for a well born lady to live?’

‘There have been others,’ said Mr Parker Pyne. ‘There was Lady Hester Stanhope –’

‘This one is mad,’ said the other abruptly. ‘You could see it in her eyes. Just so have I seen the eyes of my submarine commander in the war. He is now in an asylum.’

Mr Parker Pyne was thoughtful. He remembered Lord Micheldever, Lady Esther Carr’s father, well. He had worked under him when the latter was Home Secretary – a big blond man with laughing blue eyes. He had seen Lady Micheldever once – a noted Irish beauty with her black hair and violet-blue eyes. They were both handsome, normal people, but for all that there *was* insanity in the Carr family. It cropped up every now and then, after missing a generation. It was odd, he thought, that Herr Schlagal should stress the point.

‘And the other lady,’ he asked idly.

‘The other lady – is dead.’

Something in his voice made Mr Parker Pyne look up sharply.

‘I have a heart,’ said Herr Schlagal. ‘I feel. She was, to me, most beautiful, that lady. You know how it is, these things come over you all of a sudden. She was a flower – a flower.’ He sighed deeply. ‘I went to see them

once – at the house at Shiraz. The Lady Esther, she asked me to come. My little one, my flower, she was afraid of something, I could see it. When next I came back from Baghdad, I hear that she is dead. Dead!'

He paused and then said thoughtfully: 'It might be that the other one killed her. She was mad, I tell you.'

He sighed, and Mr Parker Pyne ordered two Benedictines.

'The curaçao, it is good,' said the Georgian waiter, and brought them two curaçaos.

Just after noon the following day, Mr Parker Pyne had his first view of Shiraz. They had flown over mountain ranges with narrow, desolate valleys between, and all arid, parched, dry wilderness. Then suddenly Shiraz came into view – an emerald-green jewel in the heart of the wilderness.

Mr Parker Pyne enjoyed Shiraz as he had not enjoyed Teheran. The primitive character of the hotel did not appal him, nor the equally primitive character of the streets.

He found himself in the midst of a Persian holiday. The Nan Ruz festival had begun on the previous evening – the fifteen-day period in which the Persians celebrate their New Years. He wandered through the empty bazaars and passed out into the great open stretch of common on the north side of the city. All Shiraz was celebrating.

One day he walked just outside the town. He had been to the tomb of Hafiz the poet, and it was on returning that he saw, and was fascinated by, a house. A house all tiled in blue and rose and yellow, set in a green garden with water and orange trees and roses. It was, he felt, the house of a dream.

That night he was dining with the English consul and he asked about the house.

'Fascinating place, isn't it? It was built by a former wealthy governor of Luristan, who had made a good thing out of his official position. An English-woman's got it now. You must have heard of her. Lady Esther Carr. Mad as a hatter. Gone completely native. Won't have anything to do with anything or anyone British.'

'Is she young?'

'Too young to play the fool in this way. She's about thirty.'

'There was another Englishwoman with her, wasn't there? A woman who died?'

‘Yes; that was about three years ago. Happened the day after I took up my post here, as a matter of fact. Barham, my predecessor, died suddenly, you know.’

‘How did she die?’ asked Mr Parker Pyne bluntly.

‘Fell from that courtyard or balcony place on the first floor. She was Lady Esther’s maid or companion, I forget which. Anyway, she was carrying the breakfast tray and stepped back over the edge. Very sad; nothing to be done; cracked her skull on the stone below.’

‘What was her name?’

‘King, I think; or was it Willis? No, that’s the missionary woman. Rather a nice-looking girl.’

‘Was Lady Esther upset?’

‘Yes – no. I don’t know. She was very queer; I couldn’t make her out. She’s a very – well, imperious creature. You can see she is somebody, if you know what I mean; she rather scared me with her commanding ways and her dark, flashing eyes.‘

He laughed half-apologetically, then looked curiously at his companion. Mr Parker Pyne was apparently staring into space. The match he had just struck to light his cigarette was burning away unheeded in his hand. It burned down to his fingers and he dropped it with an ejaculation of pain. Then he saw the consul’s astonished expression and smiled.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said.

‘Wool gathering, weren’t you?’

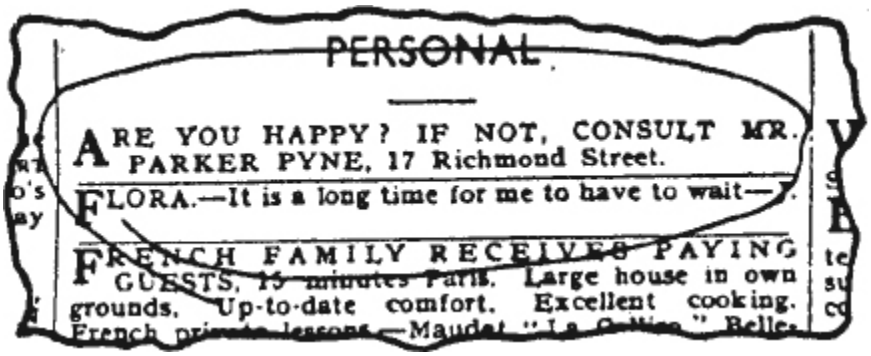
‘Three bags full,’ said Mr Parker Pyne enigmatically.

They talked of other matters.

That evening, by the light of a small oil lamp, Mr Parker Pyne wrote a letter. He hesitated a good deal over its composition. Yet in the end it was very simple:

> *Mr Parker Pyne presents his compliments to Lady Esther Carr and begs to state that he is staying at the Hotel Fars for the next three days should she wish to consult him.*

He enclosed a cutting – the famous advertisement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‘That ought to do the trick,’ said Mr Parker Pyne as he got gingerly into his rather uncomfortable bed. ‘Let me see, nearly three years; yes, it ought to do it.’

On the following day about four o’clock the answer came. It was brought by a Persian servant who knew no English.

Lady Esther Carr will be glad if Mr Parker Pyne will call upon her at nine o’clock this evening.

Mr Parker Pyne smiled.

It was the same servant who received him that evening. He was taken through the dark garden and up an outside staircase that led round to the back of the house. From there a door was opened and he passed through into the central court or balcony, which was open to the night. A big divan was placed against the wall and on it reclined a striking figure.

Lady Esther was attired in Eastern robes, and it might have been suspected that one reason for her preference lay in the fact that they suited her rich, Oriental style of beauty. Imperious, the consul called her, and indeed imperious she looked. Her chin was held high and her brows were arrogant.

‘You are Mr Parker Pyne? Sit down there.’

Her hand pointed to a heap of cushions. On the third finger there flashed a big emerald carved with the arms of her family. It was an heirloom and must be worth a small fortune, Mr Parker Pyne reflected.

He lowered himself obediently, though with a little difficulty. For a man of his figure it is not easy to sit on the ground gracefully.

A servant appeared with coffee. Mr Parker Pyne took his cup and sipped appreciatively.

His hostess had acquired the Oriental habit of infinite leisure. She did not rush into conversation. She, too, sipped her coffee with half-closed eyes. At last she spoke.

‘So you help unhappy people,’ she said. ‘At least, that is what your advertisement claims.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why did you send it to me? Is it your way of – doing business on your travels?’

There was something decidedly offensive in her voice, but Mr Parker Pyne ignored it. He answered simply, ‘No. My idea in travelling is to have a complete holiday from business.’

‘Then why send it to me?’

‘Because I had reason to believe that you – are unhappy.’

There was a moment’s silence. He was very curious. How would she take that? She gave herself a minute to decide that point. Then she laughed.

‘I suppose you thought that anyone who leaves the world, who lives as I do, cut off from my race, from my country, must do so because she is unhappy! Sorrow, disappointment – you think something like that drove me into exile? Oh, well, how should you understand? There – in England – I was a fish out of water. Here I am myself. I am an Oriental at heart. I love this seclusion. I dare say you can’t understand that. To you, I must seem’ – she hesitated a moment – ‘mad.’

‘You’re not mad,’ said Mr Parker Pyne.

There was a good deal of quiet assurance in his voice. She looked at him curiously.

‘But they’ve been saying I am, I suppose. Fools! It takes all kinds to make a world. I’m perfectly happy.’

‘And yet you told me to come here,’ said Mr Parker Pyne.

‘I will admit I was curious to see you.’ She hesitated. ‘Besides, I never want to go back there – to England – but all the same, sometimes I like to hear what is going on in –’

‘In the world you have left?’

She acknowledged the sentence with a nod.

Mr Parker Pyne began to talk. His voice, mellow and reassuring, began quietly, then rose ever so little as he emphasized this point and that.

He talked of London, of society gossip, of famous men and women, of new restaurants and new night clubs, of race meetings and shooting parties and country-house scandals. He talked of clothes, of fashions from Paris, of little shops in unfashionable streets where marvellous bargains could be had.

He described theatres and cinemas, he gave film news, he described the building of new garden suburbs, he talked of bulbs and gardening, and he came last to a homely description of London in the evening, with the trams and buses and the hurrying crowds going homeward after the day's work and of the little homes awaiting them, and of the whole strange intimate pattern of English family life.

It was a very remarkable performance, displaying as it did wide and unusual knowledge and a clever marshalling of the facts. Lady Esther's head had drooped; the arrogance of her poise had been abandoned. For some time her tears had been quietly falling, and now that he had finished, she abandoned all pretence and wept openly.

Mr Parker Pyne said nothing. He sat there watching her. His face had the quiet, satisfied expression of one who has conducted an experiment and obtained the desired result.

She raised her head at last. 'Well,' she said bitterly, 'are you satisfied?'

'I think so – now.'

'How shall I bear it; how shall I bear it? Never to leave here; never to see – anyone again!' The cry came as though wrung out of her. She caught herself up, flushing. 'Well?' she demanded fiercely. 'Aren't you going to make the obvious remark? Aren't you going to say, "If you want to go home so much, why not do so?"'

'No.' Mr Parker Pyne shook his head. 'It's not nearly as easy as that for you.'

For the first time a little look of fear crept into her eyes.

'Do you know why I can't go?'

'I think so.'

'Wrong.' She shook her head. 'The reason I can't go is a reason you'd never guess.'

'I don't guess,' said Mr Parker Pyne. 'I observe – and I classify.'

She shook her head. 'You don't know anything at all.'

‘I shall have to convince you, I see,’ said Mr Parker Pyne pleasantly. ‘When you came out here, Lady Esther, you flew, I believe, by the new German Air Service from Baghdad?’

‘Yes?’

‘You were flown by a young pilot, Herr Schlagal, who afterwards came here to see you.’

‘Yes.’

A different ‘yes’ in some indescribable way – a softer ‘yes’.

‘And you had a friend, or companion who – died.’ A voice like steel now – cold, offensive.

‘My companion.’

‘Her name was –?’

‘Muriel King.’

‘Were you fond of her?’

‘What do you mean, fond?’ She paused, checked herself. ‘She was useful to me.’

She said it haughtily and Mr Parker Pyne was reminded of the consul’s saying: ‘You can see she is somebody, if you know what I mean.’

‘Were you sorry when she died?’

‘I – naturally! Really, Mr Pyne, is it necessary to go into all this?’ She spoke angrily, and went on without waiting for an answer: ‘It has been very good of you to come. But I am a little tired. If you will tell me what I owe you –?’

But Mr Parker Pyne did not move. He showed no signs of taking offence. He went quietly on with his questions. ‘Since she died, Herr Schlagal has not been to see you. Suppose he were to come, would you receive him?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘You refuse absolutely?’

‘Absolutely. Herr Schlagal will not be admitted.’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Parker Pyne thoughtfully. ‘You could not say anything else.’

The defensive armour of her arrogance broke down a little. She said uncertainly: ‘I – I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Did you know, Lady Esther, that young Schlagal fell in love with Muriel King? He is a sentimental young man. He still treasures her memory.’

‘Does he?’ Her voice was almost a whisper.

‘What was she like?’

‘What do you mean, what was she like? How do I know?’

‘You must have looked at her sometimes,’ said Mr Parker Pyne mildly.

‘Oh, that! She was quite a nice-looking young woman.’

‘About your own age?’

‘Just about.’ There was a pause, and then she said:

‘Why do you think that – that Schlagal cared for her?’

‘Because he told me so. Yes, yes, in the most unmistakable terms. As I say, he is a sentimental young man. He was glad to confide in me. He was very upset at her dying the way she did.’

Lady Esther sprang to her feet. ‘Do you believe I murdered her?’

Mr Parker Pyne did not spring to his feet. He was not a springing kind of man.

‘No, my dear child,’ he said. ‘I do *not* believe that you murdered her, and that being so, I think the sooner you stop this play-acting and go home, the better.’

‘What do you mean, play-acting?’

‘The truth is, you lost your nerve. Yes, you did. You lost your nerve badly. You thought you’d be accused of murdering your employer.’

The girl made a sudden movement.

Mr Parker Pyne went on. ‘You are not Lady Esther Carr. I knew that before I came here, but I’ve tested you to make sure.’ His smile broke out, bland and benevolent.

‘When I said my little piece just now, I was watching you, and every time you reacted as *Muriel King*, not as Esther Carr. The cheap shops, the cinemas, the new garden suburbs, going home by bus and tram – you reacted to all those. Country-house gossip, new night clubs, the chatter of Mayfair, race meetings – none of these meant anything to you.’

His voice became even more persuasive and fatherly. ‘Sit down and tell me about it. You didn’t murder Lady Esther, but you thought you might be accused of doing so. Just tell me how it all came about.’

She took a long breath; then she sank down once more on the divan and began to speak. Her words came hurriedly, in little bursts.

‘I must begin – at the beginning. I – I was afraid of her. She was mad – not quite mad – just a little. She brought me out here with her. Like a fool I was delighted; I thought it was so romantic. Little fool. That’s what I was, a

little fool. There was some business about a chauffeur. She was man-mad – absolutely man-mad. He wouldn't have anything to do with her, and it got out; her friends got to know about it and laughed. And she broke loose from her family and came out here.

'It was all a pose to save her face – solitude in the desert – all that sort of thing. She would have kept it up for a bit, and then gone back. But she got queerer and queerer. And then there was the pilot. She – took a fancy to him. He came here to see me, and she thought – oh well, you can understand. But he must have made it clear to her …'

'And then she suddenly turned on me. She was awful, frightening. She said I should never go home again. She said I was in her power. She said I was a slave. Just that – a slave. She had the power of life and death over me.'

Mr Parker Pyne nodded. He saw the situation unfolding. Lady Esther slowly going over the edge of sanity, as others of her family had gone before her, and the frightened girl, ignorant and untravelled, believing everything that was said to her.

'But one day something in me seemed to snap. I stood up to her. I told her that if it came to it I was stronger than she was. I told her I'd throw her down on to the stones below. She was frightened, really frightened. I suppose she'd just thought me a worm. I took a step toward her – I don't know what she thought I meant to do. She moved backwards; she – she stepped back off the edge!' Muriel King buried her face in her hands.

'And then?' Mr Parker Pyne prompted gently.

'I lost my head. I thought they'd say I'd pushed her over. I thought nobody would listen to me. I thought I should be thrown into some awful prison out here.' Her lips worked. Mr Parker Pyne saw clearly enough the unreasoning fear that had possessed her. 'And then it came to me – if it were I! I knew that there would be a new British consul who'd never seen either of us. The other one had died.

'I thought I could manage the servants. To them we were two mad Englishwomen. When one was dead, the other carried on. I gave them good presents of money and told them to send for the British consul. He came and I received him as Lady Esther. I had her ring on my finger. He was very nice and arranged everything. Nobody seemed to have the least suspicion.'

Mr Parker Pyne nodded thoughtfully. Lady Esther Carr might be mad as a hatter, but she was still Lady Esther Carr.

'And then afterwards,' continued Muriel, 'I wished I hadn't. I saw that I'd been quite mad myself. I was condemned to stay on here playing a part. I didn't see how I could ever get away. If I confessed the truth now, it would look more than ever as though I'd murdered her. Oh, Mr Pyne, what shall I do? What shall I do?'

'Do?' Mr Parker Pyne rose to his feet as briskly as his figure allowed. 'My dear child, you will come with me now to the British consul, who is a very amiable and kindly man. There will be certain unpleasant formalities to go through. I don't promise you that it will be all plain sailing, but you won't be hanged for murder. By the way, why was the breakfast tray found with the body?'

'I threw it over. I – I thought it would look more like me to have a tray there. Was it silly of me?'

'It was rather a clever touch,' said Mr Parker Pyne. 'In fact, it was the one point which made me wonder if you might, perhaps, have done away with Lady Esther – that is, until I saw you. When I saw you, I knew that whatever else you might do in your life, you would never kill anyone.'

'Because I haven't the nerve, you mean?'

'Your reflexes wouldn't work that way,' said Mr Parker Pyne, smiling. 'Now, shall we go? There's an unpleasant job to be faced, but I'll see you through it, and then – home to Streatham Hill – it is Streatham Hill, isn't it? Yes, I thought so. I saw your face contract when I mentioned one particular bus number. Are you coming, my dear?'

Muriel King hung back. 'They'll never believe me,' she said nervously. 'Her family and all. They wouldn't believe she could act the way she did.'

'Leave it to me,' said Mr Parker Pyne. 'I know something of the family history, you see. Come, child, don't go on playing the coward. Remember, there's a young man sighing his heart out. We had better arrange that it is in his plane you fly to Baghdad.'

The girl smiled and blushed. 'I'm ready,' she said simply. Then, as she moved towards the door, she turned back. 'You said you knew I was not Lady Esther Carr before you saw me. How could you possibly tell that?'

'Statistics,' said Mr Parker Pyne.

'Statistics?'

‘Yes. Both Lord and Lady Micheldever had blue eyes. When the consul mentioned that their daughter had flashing *dark* eyes I knew there was something wrong. Brown-eyed people may produce a blue-eyed child, but not the other way about. A scientific fact, I assure you.’

‘I think you’re wonderful!’ said Muriel King.

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About the Author

Agatha Christie is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold more than a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages. She is the author of eighty crime novels and short-story collections, nineteen plays, two memoirs, and six novels written under the name Mary Westmacott.

She first tried her hand at detective fiction while working in a hospital dispensary during World War I, creating the now legendary Hercule Poirot with her debut novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. With *The Murder in the Vicarage*, published in 1930, she introduced another beloved sleuth, Miss Jane Marple. Additional series characters include the husband-and-wife crime-fighting team of Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, private investigator Parker Pyne, and Scotland Yard detectives Superintendent Battle and Inspector Japp.

Many of Christie's novels and short stories were adapted into plays, films, and television series. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play of all, opened in 1952 and is the longest-running play in history. Among her best-known film adaptations are *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974) and *Death on the Nile* (1978), with Albert Finney and Peter Ustinov playing Hercule Poirot, respectively. On the small screen Poirot has been most memorably portrayed by David Suchet, and Miss Marple by Joan Hickson and subsequently Geraldine McEwan and Julia McKenzie.

Christie was first married to Archibald Christie and then to archaeologist Sir Max Mallowan, whom she accompanied on expeditions to countries that would also serve as the settings for many of her novels. In 1971 she achieved one of Britain's highest honors when she was made a Dame of the British Empire. She died in 1976 at the age of eighty-five. Her one hundred and twentieth anniversary was celebrated around the world in 2010.

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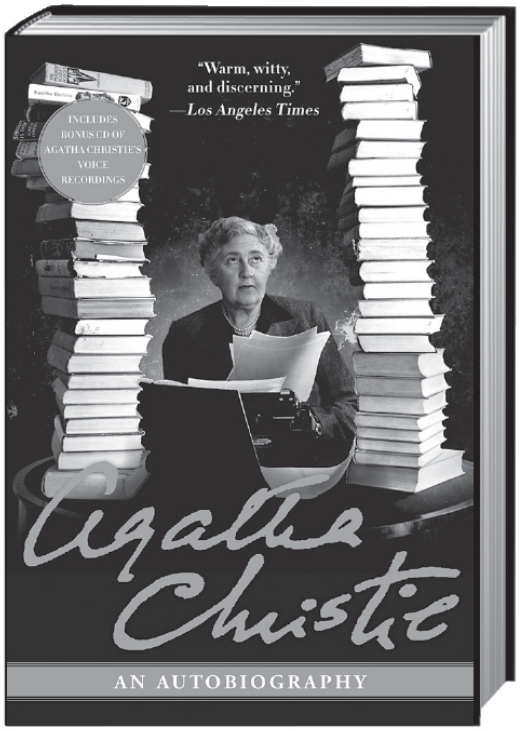

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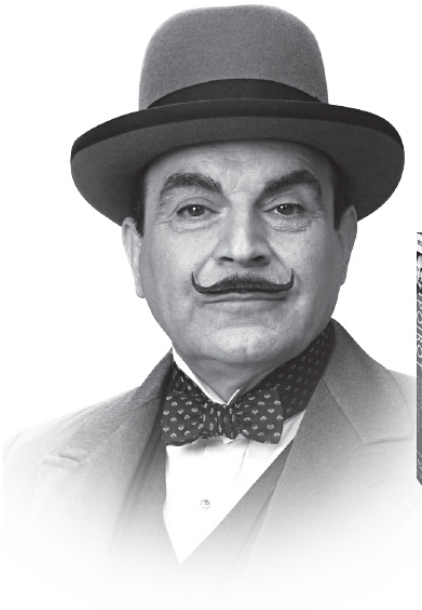

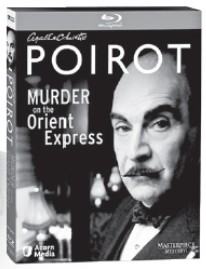

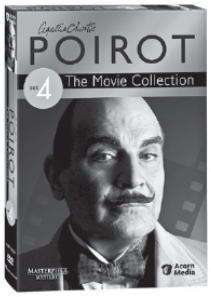

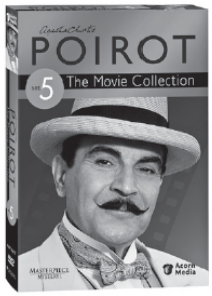

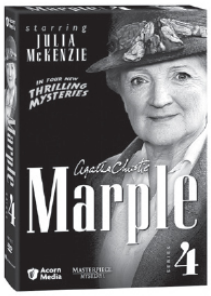

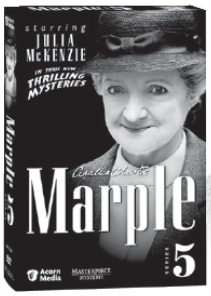

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